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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3336
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RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000028

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR I/O A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: CALM AFTER ROCKETS; PALESTINIANS BLAMED

REF: A. BEIRUT 00025
[1](#)B. 08 BEIRUT 1806

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William K. Grant for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) The situation in southern Lebanon and throughout the country appears calm after today's exchange of fire between an unknown group in Lebanon and Israel. Press reports and Embassy contacts doubt that Hizballah had a direct role in launching three Katushya rockets into northern Israel the morning of January 9. Most believe a Palestinian group fired the rockets in a sign of solidarity with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. MOD contacts say an unnamed Palestinian group claimed responsibility for the attack. The Lebanese Armed Forces and UNIFIL stepped up security measures in southern Lebanon and initiated an investigation into the rocket launching. Prime Minister Siniora and President Sleiman issued statements underscoring GOL support for UNSCR 1701. Siniora blamed the incident on "parties that want to drag Lebanon" into a bad situation. Embassy has urged GOL officials to continue to demonstrate restraint in this matter. The Lebanese cabinet will meet this evening and may issue another statement after that meeting. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) At approximately 0730 local time on January 9 someone launched what Lebanese Ministry of Defense contacts described as three "old" Katushya rockets from southern Lebanon, near the border town of Alta ech Chaab, into northern Israel, near Nahariya. In response to the attack, Israel fired five 120-millimeter artillery rounds at the launching site, according to the Lebanese MOD. There were no reports of injuries or damage in Lebanon. Israel also conducted overflights of southern Lebanon. The MOD confirmed a "loud explosion" in southern Lebanon at approximately 1100 local, initially attributed to another rocket attack into Israel, was a sonic boom from an Israeli plane.

CALLS OF RESTRAINT

[1](#)3. (SBU) The strikes were met with calls of restraint and condemnation by GOL and UNIFIL officials. In a statement, Prime Minister Siniora condemned the rocket attacks and the Israeli response and accused those responsible for seeking to undermine stability. He said the rocket attack on Israel was

a violation of UNSC Resolution 1701 and called for a full investigation by the Lebanese authorities and UNIFIL. He reaffirmed GOL support for UNSCR 1701. President Sleiman's statement also underscored support for 1701. UNIFIL Deputy Spokesperson Andrea Tenenti told Embassy staff that, in coordination with the LAF, UNIFIL has initiated an investigation into the incident. UNIFIL Commander Claudio Graziano called for restraint from both sides.

¶4. (SBU) Today's Cabinet meeting, announced last night to discuss the situation in Gaza, also will likely cover today's events. According to press outlets, the Israeli military said the Lebanese army and government must prevent rocket attacks on Israel. Israel would respond to every rocket attack from southern Lebanon with a similar attack, press said.

CLAIMS OF RESPONSIBILITY

¶5. (C) Despite ever-present fears after the July 2006 war of renewed fighting between Hizballah and Israel, most observers assessed that Hizballah was not responsible for today's events. Minister Nassib Lahoud participated in a meeting today with Hizballah MP Mohammed Fneish and Siniora and told the Charge later that Hizballah supports restraint. Descriptions of the rockets fired from southern Lebanon as "old" raised initial doubts of Hizballah's responsibility, as common opinion and 2006 war evidence showed the group with a much more advanced weapons stockpile. Although Hizballah SYG Nasrallah in an Ashura speech January 7 strongly supported

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Hamas' battle in Gaza, most observers assessed Hizballah as reluctant to open a new front with Israel in support of a cause other than its own (Ref A). Additionally, Information Minister Tarek Mitri told press sources late morning that Hizballah informed the Lebanese Government it was uninvolved in the attack. Local press sources also said Israeli officials doubted Hizballah responsibility in the missile strike.

¶6. (C) Without Hizballah culpability, suspicion has fallen to an unidentified Palestinian group that probably fired the rockets in a show of solidarity for Hamas' struggle in Gaza. No group has been claimed responsibility. Hamas spokesman in Lebanon Raafat Mora denied Hamas' involvement, emphasizing the group's refusal to use "any other Arab soil" outside the Palestinian territories to fight Israel.

¶7. (C) Anwar Raja, a Damascus-based leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestinian-General Command (PFLP-GC), in an interview with Al-Jazeera would not confirm or deny PFLP-GC responsibility for the attack. Aide to Prime Minister Siniora Roula Nouredine, without citing any evidence, claimed PFLP-GC was responsible in meeting with Charge. She said the GOL, through the French Ambassador, had asked the French to pressure Syria to get the PFLP-GC to stop actions like this. Lebanese Forces Leader Samir Geagea in a televised statement also blamed PFLP-GC for the attack. March 14 SYG Fares Souaid noted, however, that the attack probably could not have happened without Hizballah's knowledge. Later in the day, at 1700 local, Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel carried a news bulletin that PFLP-GC denied firing rockets into northern Israel.

HEIGHTENED SECURITY, RELATIVE CALM

¶8. (C) UNIFIL said it has intensified patrols in its area of operation to prevent further incidents. The Italian Ambassador, who had spoken to UNIFIL Commander Graziano, told Charge that UNIFIL could maintain the heightened level of patrols for only three or four days. UNIFIL already had increased patrols following the December 25 2008 discovery in

southern Lebanon of several rockets aimed towards Israel (Ref B).

¶9. (C) DOD contacts report two LAF Ranger companies have been deployed to the southern region of Lebanon and the LAF has issued orders to LAF soldiers to stop and question all Palestinians traveling outside of the Palestinian camps. According to Tenenti, the UNIFIL Force Commander was maintaining close contact with all parties, who had assured him of their continued commitment to maintain the cessation of hostilities in accordance with UNSCR 1701. Nouredine told Charge that PM Siniora considers the situation "contained."

¶10. (SBU) United Nations Mine Action Coordination Center (UNMACC) Chief of Staff Tekimiti Gilbert assessed that belief in Hizballah's non-involvement had calmed the atmosphere in southern Lebanon following the exchange of fire. He told Poloff the common assessment in the southern city of Tyre, where he said people were moving freely and normally around the streets, was that Palestinians had fired the rockets. Despite the relative calm, Ali Hamdan, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's Press Advisor, said that people in the south and Beirut are scared.

¶11. (SBU) Lebanese press reported the Israeli Government reversed a decision made earlier to close schools in northern Israel because of the rocket launching; this seems to suggest the GOI does not expect sustained attacks from its northern neighbor.

¶12. (SBU) Middle Eastern Airlines, Lebanon's flag carrier, contacted us today to ask that if the situation deteriorates with Israel, we encourage the Israelis, as we did in 2006, to hold off bombing Beirut airport's runways until MEA can move its aircraft out of harm's way. USG action in 2006 helped save MEA aircraft, a boon to Lebanon's post war tourism

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industry.
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